



Oman

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2002](#)

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
March 31, 2003

The Sultanate of Oman is a monarchy that has been ruled by the Al Bu Sa'id family since the middle of the 18th century. It has no political parties, but does have one representative institution, whose members were elected directly by voters selected by the Government. The Sultan, Qaboos Bin Sa'id Al Sa'id, acceded to the throne in 1970. Although the Sultan retains firm control over all important policy issues, he has brought tribal leaders and other notable persons into the Government. In accordance with tradition and cultural norms, much decision-making is by consensus among these leaders. In 1991 the Sultan established a Consultative Council, or Majlis Al-Shura, which replaced an older advisory body. The Consultative Council was expanded to 83 seats for the 2000 elections, and members were chosen directly by the vote of 175,000 government-selected electors, of whom approximately 100,000 actually voted. In 1996 the Sultan promulgated by decree the country's "Basic Charter" (also known as the Basic Law), which provides for many basic human rights. Implementing legislation has only been enacted in some family, judicial administration, and financial cases; however, the Government has made it clear that the Basic Charter has the immediate force of law. While appropriate laws pertaining to various articles of the Charter will be enacted, the responsibilities delineated in the Charter came into full force when it was enacted in 1996. In cases where there is no implementing legislation, judges must render judgement in accord with the principles of the Basic Charter. The Consultative Council has no formal legislative powers but may question government ministers and recommend changes to new laws regarding economic and social policy, which on occasion leads to amendments to proposed decrees. In 2001 the Sultan appointed 53 members, including 5 women, as members of the State Council (Majlis Al-Dawla), which, with the Consultative Council, forms the bicameral body known as the Majlis Oman (Council of Oman). In November the Sultan announced his intention to permit native born citizens 21 or older to vote in the Consultative Council elections in 2003. The judiciary was not independent in practice and courts were subject to the Sultan's influence. The Sultan had the right to overturn judicial decisions on appeal.

The internal and external security apparatus fell under the authority of the Royal Office, which coordinated all intelligence and security policies. The Internal Security Service investigated all matters related to internal security. The Royal Oman Police (ROP), whose head also had cabinet status, performed regular police duties, provided security at airports, served as the country's immigration agency, and maintained a small coast guard. Unlike in previous years, there were no reports that security forces committed human rights abuses during the year. The country had a population of approximately 2.4 million, including approximately 624,000 foreigners. The country has used its modest oil revenue to make impressive economic progress and improve public access to health care, education, and social services for its citizens. The economy was mixed, with significant government participation in industry, transportation, and communications.

The Government generally respected the human rights of its citizens' in some areas; however, its record was poor in other areas. Citizens did not have the right to change their government. Police did not always follow procedures regarding arrest and detention, and in some instances police handling of arrest and detention constituted incommunicado detention. In 2000, royal decree 97/99 came into effect that detailed the rules, regulations, and procedures governing criminal and civil trials. In the past, there were instances in which due process was denied to persons tried in state security courts. Citizens must obtain permission from the Government to marry foreigners. The Government restricted freedom of expression and association. The Government must approve the establishment of all associations, and human rights organizations were prohibited. The Government did not ensure full rights for women. The Government severely restricted worker rights. Foreign workers in private firms at times were placed in situations amounting to forced labor, and abuse of foreign domestic servants was a problem.

The 1996 Basic Charter, issued as a decree by the Sultan, defines and protects many basic human rights, such as an independent judiciary, and the freedoms of association, speech, and the press. The Basic Charter states that the Government was to strive to issue all enabling laws within 2 years of November 1996. Only certain laws pertaining to the legal code for family and interpersonal relationships, to judicial reform, and to aspects of the Finance Ministry have been enacted. Local legal experts consider the rights and responsibilities delineated by the Basic Charter to have the full and immediate force of law, without the need for separate implementing legislation. Oman was invited by the Community of Democracies' (CD) Convening Group to attend the November 2002 second CD Ministerial Meeting in Seoul, Republic of Korea, as an observer.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports of the arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life committed by the Government or its agents.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The Basic Charter specifically prohibits torture, and there were no reports of torture during the year.

Judges had the right to order investigations of allegations of mistreatment. The Basic Charter specifically prohibits "physical or mental torture" and stipulates that all confessions obtained by such methods are to be considered null and void.

In 2000, the police used tear gas and physical force to control demonstrations, and made some arrests (see Section 2.b.). In April the police broke up demonstrations but there were no reports of excessive use of force or tear gas.

Prison conditions were spartan, but appeared to meet international standards. Access to some prisoners was restricted severely. There were separate facilities for men and women, as well as separate facilities for juveniles and adults. Security prisoners were held separately and in different conditions from regular prisoners. Pretrial detainees also were held separately.

The Government did not permit independent monitoring of prisons.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

The Basic Charter provides for certain legal and procedural rights for detainees. The police may obtain warrants prior to making arrests but were not required by law to do so. However, within 24 hours of arrest, the authorities must obtain court orders to hold suspects in pretrial detention, and the police were required to file charges or request a magistrate judge to order continued detention. However, in practice the police did not always follow these procedures. Judges may order detentions for 14 days to allow investigation and may grant extensions if necessary. There was a functioning system of bail.

Police handling of arrests and detentions constituted incommunicado detention in some instances. The police did not always notify a detainee's family or, in the case of a foreign worker, the worker's sponsor of the detention. At times notification was only made just prior to the detainee's release. The authorities posted the previous week's trial results (including the date of the trial, the name of the accused, the claim, and the sentence) near the magistrate court building. The police did not always permit attorneys and family members to visit detainees. Judges occasionally interceded to ensure that security officials allowed such visits.

The Basic Charter prohibits exile, and the Government did not use forced exile.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Basic Charter affirms the independence of the judiciary; however, the various courts were subordinate to the Sultan and subject to his influence in practice. All judges are appointed by the Sultan and serve at his pleasure. The Sultan acted as a court of final appeal and interceded in cases of particular interest, such as those concerning national security. However, there were no reported instances in which the Sultan overturned a decision of the magistrate courts.

In 1999 the Sultan issued several royal decrees to establish a law on judicial authority and to affirm the independence of the judiciary as called for in the Basic Charter. The decrees formally established the judiciary as an independent, hierarchical system composed of a Supreme Court, an appeals court, primary courts (one located in each region), and, within the primary courts, divisional courts. Within each of the courts there are divisions to consider commercial, civil, penal, labor, taxation, general, and personal status cases (the latter under Shari'a). The former Authority for the Settlement of Commercial Disputes was abolished in 2001, and commercial cases were heard in primary courts. The General Prosecutor's Office, which before the 2001 reform was under the jurisdiction of the Royal Omani Police Chief Inspector, became an independent legal entity within the Ministry of Justice. In 1999 an Administrative Court was established to review complaints against the misuse of governmental authority; it operated under the authority of the Diwan of Royal Court.

The Ministry of Justice administered all courts. The judiciary comprised the magistrate courts, which adjudicated misdemeanors and criminal matters, and the Shari'a (Islamic law) courts, which adjudicated personal status cases such as divorce and inheritance. The Labor Welfare Board attempted to mediate disputes between employers and employees. If a settlement cannot be reached, the parties may seek recourse in the appropriate courts. The courts of general jurisdiction may hear cases involving rent disputes.

In 1984 a royal decree established the magistrate court system of primary courts, appeals courts, and the Supreme Court to take over all criminal cases from the Shari'a courts. Regional courts of first instance handled misdemeanor cases, which were heard by individual judges. All felonies were adjudicated at the Central Magistrate Court by a panel made up of the President of the Magistrate Court and two judges. All rulings of the felony panel were final except for those in which the defendant was sentenced to death. The death penalty rarely was used, except in serious felonies such as murder, and the Sultan must approve death sentences. There was no provision for amputation.

The Criminal Appeals Panel also was presided over by the President of the Magistrate Court and included the court's vice president and two judges. This panel heard appeals of rulings made by all courts of first instance. In the past, specially trained prosecutors from the Royal Oman Police (ROP), all of whom were trained as police officers as well as prosecutors, carried out the role of public prosecutor in criminal cases; however, as a step toward implementing a 1999 Royal decree designed to increase the independence of the judiciary, prosecutors were made independent of the ROP.

The Criminal Code does not specify the rights of the accused. There are no written rules of evidence, codified procedures for entering cases into the criminal system, or any detailed legal provisions for a public trial. Criminal procedures have developed by tradition and precedents in the magistrate courts. In criminal cases, the police provided defendants with the written charges against them; defendants were presumed innocent and have the right to present evidence and confront witnesses. The prosecution and the defense direct questions to witnesses through the judge, who was usually the only person to question witnesses in court. Article 22 of the Basic Charter provides for the presumption of innocence, and Article 23 provides for the right to counsel, ensuring for those financially unable the means to legal defense. Judges often pronounced the verdict and sentence within 1 day of the completion of a trial. Those convicted may appeal jail sentences longer than 3 months and fines over the equivalent of \$1,250 (480 rials) to a three-judge panel. Defendants accused of national security offenses and serious felonies did not have the right of appeal.

The State Security Court tried cases involving national security and criminal cases that the Government decided required expeditious or especially sensitive handling. Magistrate court judges have presided over trials in the State Security Court. Defendants tried by the Security Court were not permitted to have legal representation present. The timing and the location of the Court's proceedings were not disclosed publicly. The Court did not follow legal procedures as strictly as the magistrate courts, although prominent civilian jurists formed the judicial panel. The Sultan has exercised his powers of extending leniency, including in political cases.

The Shari'a courts were administered by the Ministry of Justice and applied Shari'a law as interpreted under the Ibadhi school of Islamic jurisprudence. Courts of first instance were located in each of the 59 wilayats, or governorates, and were presided over by a single judge, or qadi. Appeals of the rulings of the courts of first instance involving prison sentences of 2 weeks or more or fines greater than \$260 (100 rials) must be brought within 1 month before the Shari'a Court of Appeals. Panels of three judges heard appeals cases. Court of Appeals rulings themselves may be appealed, within a 1-month period, to the Supreme Committee for Complaints, which was composed of four members, including the Minister of Justice and the Grand Mufti of the Sultanate.

In 1997 the Government promulgated into law the provisions of the 1996 Basic Charter pertaining to family law which falls under the purview of the Shari'a courts. The law has regularized the nature of the cases and the range of corresponding judgments within the Shari'a court system that only deals with family law.

There were no reports of political prisoners.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The police were not required by law to obtain search warrants. There was a widely held view that the Government eavesdropped on both oral and written communications. Citizens were required to obtain permission from the Ministry of Interior to marry foreigners, except nationals of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Such permission was not granted automatically. Delays or denial of permission resulted in secret marriages within the country. Marriages in foreign countries may lead to denial of entry of the foreign spouse into the country and prevent a legitimate child from claiming citizenship rights.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

Although the Basic Charter provides for freedom of speech and of the press, the Government restricted these rights in practice. The law prohibits criticism of the Sultan in any form or medium. The authorities tolerated criticism of government officials and

agencies, but such criticism rarely received media coverage.

The Press and Publication Law authorizes the Government to censor all domestic and imported publications. Ministry of Information censors may act against any material regarded as politically, culturally, or sexually offensive. Journalists and writers generally exercised self-censorship to avoid government harassment. Editorials generally were consistent with the Government's views, although the authorities tolerated some criticism regarding foreign affairs issues. The Government discouraged in-depth reporting on controversial domestic issues and sought to influence privately owned dailies and periodicals by subsidizing their operating costs. There were five daily newspapers, three in Arabic and two in English. Arabic language dailies "Al-Watan" and "Shabiba" as well as English daily "Times of Oman" were privately owned.

Customs officials confiscated videocassette tapes and erased offensive material, despite the lack of published guidelines regarding what was considered offensive. Such tapes may or may not be returned to their owners. Government censorship decisions were changed periodically without stated reason. There was a general perception that the confiscation of books and tapes at the border from private individuals and restrictions on popular novels eased somewhat; however, it reportedly has become more difficult to obtain permission to distribute books in the local market that censors decide have factual errors regarding the country (including outdated maps).

The Government owned three local radio stations and two local television stations. In general they did not air any politically controversial material, although the state television company was allowed to broadcast public question and answer sessions between ministers and the Majlis Al-Shura; however, this only happened twice during the year. The Government did not allow the establishment of privately owned radio and television companies. The availability of satellite dishes has made foreign broadcast information accessible to those with the financial resources to obtain access to the dishes.

The appropriate government authority, such as Sultan Qaboos University, the police, or the relevant ministry must approve public cultural events, including plays, concerts, lectures, and seminars. Most organizations avoided controversial issues because of fears that the authorities may cancel their events.

The Government, through its national telecommunications company, made Internet access available for a charge to citizens and foreign residents. However, it blocked certain web sites that it considered pornographic or politically sensitive. As use of the Internet to express views normally not permitted in other media grew, the Government took additional measures to monitor and censor it. The Government placed warnings on web sites that criticism of the Sultan or personal criticism of government officials was likely to be censored, which ultimately caused some to practice self-censorship.

The Government restricted academic freedom, particularly regarding publishing or discussing controversial matters, such as politics. Professors may be dismissed for going beyond acceptable boundaries.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Basic Charter provides for freedom of assembly, although all public gatherings require government approval. The authorities with rare exceptions enforced this requirement. Over the course of 8 days in 2000, rare, unauthorized public demonstrations in support of the Palestinians and against Israeli and U.S. policies took place at Sultan Qaboos University and other venues. Most demonstrators were young men, and most demonstrations were peaceful. Rock throwing and vandalism of private property occurred at some locations. On one or two occasions, police used tear gas and physical force to control demonstrations and arrested some persons. After the demonstrations, the Government acted to prevent further demonstrations, through arrests and limiting demonstrations to areas that could be controlled. However, in April public demonstrations occurred in support of the Palestinian Intifada.

The Government restricted freedom of association. The law states that the Ministry of Social Development must approve the establishment of all organizations and their by-laws; however, some groups, such as certain social groups, were allowed to function without formal registration. The Government used the power to license organizations to control the political environment. It did not license groups regarded as a threat to the predominant social and political views or the interests of the Sultanate. Formal registration of foreign associations was limited to a maximum of one association for any nationality. The Basic Charter's provisions in this area regulated the formation of associations.

A 2000 royal decree allowed for the formation of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) providing services to women, children, and the elderly. Seven NGOs were registered, four relating to persons with disabilities and three professional societies. Some government-sponsored women's associations perform some associative functions and were completely dependent on government funding, while others were self-funded through membership fees, corporate donations, and product sales.

c. Freedom of Religion

The law does not provide for freedom of religion. However, the Basic Charter protects the freedom to practice religious rites, in accordance with tradition, provided that such freedom does not breach public order. The Basic Charter also provides that Islam is the state religion and that Shari'a is the basis for legislation. Non-Muslim religious organizations must be registered with the Government.

Discrimination against individuals on the basis of religion was prohibited. There were no laws prohibiting discrimination against religious minorities. Some members of the Shi'a Muslim minority claimed that they faced discrimination in employment and educational opportunities. However, some Shi'a occupied prominent positions in both the private and public sectors, although much less so in the public sector. For example, the Ministers of National Economy (also de facto Minister of Finance), Commerce and Industry, and Health were all Shi'a. Many other government officials also were Shi'a, such as the Director General of Maritime Affairs at the Ministry of Transport and Telecommunications.

Most citizens are Ibadhi or Sunni Muslims, but there is also a minority of Shi'a Muslims. Non-Muslims were free to worship at churches and temples built on land donated by the Sultan. There were many Christian denominations, which utilized two plots of donated land, on which two Catholic and two Protestant churches were built. Hindu temples also existed on government-provided land. Land was made available to Catholic and Protestant missions to provide places of worship and ministry to resident Christians in Sohar and Salalah.

The Government prohibited non-Muslims from proselytizing. It also prohibited non-Muslim groups from publishing religious material, although religious material printed abroad could be brought into the country. Certain medical and educational activity by missionaries was permitted as long as missionaries did not proselytize. Members of all religions and religious groups were free to maintain links with coreligionists abroad and undertake foreign travel for religious purposes.

The Government expected all imams to preach sermons within the parameters of standardized texts distributed monthly by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. The Government monitored mosque sermons to ensure that imams did not discuss political topics and stayed within the state-approved orthodoxy of Islam.

For a more detailed discussion see the 2002 International Religious Freedom Report.

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The law does not provide for these rights, and the Government partially restricted these rights in practice. The Government did not restrict travel by citizens within the country except to military areas. Foreigners other than diplomats must obtain a government pass to cross border points. To obtain a passport and depart the country, a woman must have authorization from her husband, father, or nearest male relative. However, a woman having a national identity card (which also must be authorized by a male relative) may travel to certain Gulf Cooperation Council countries without a passport.

The Basic Charter prohibits the extradition of political refugees, and there were no reports of the forced return of persons to a country where they feared persecution. The issue of the provision of first asylum did not arise during the year. Tight control over the entry of foreigners into the country effectively limited refugees and prospective asylum seekers from entering. There was no government policy of cooperation with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees or other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

Citizens did not have the right to peacefully change their government. The Government is an autocracy in which the Sultan retains ultimate authority on all foreign and domestic issues.

In November 1996, the Sultan promulgated by decree the first defacto written constitution, known as the Basic Charter. Although it is considered to have immediate force of law, laws and regulations to implement some provisions have not been enacted. While family, judicial, administrative, and financial implementing legislation were enacted, others have yet to be promulgated.

The law does not provide for political parties or direct elections. Citizens had indirect access to senior officials through the traditional practice of petitioning their patrons, usually the local governor, for redress of grievances. The Sultan appointed the governors. Successful redress depended on the effectiveness of a patron's access to appropriate decisionmakers. The Sultan made an annual 3-week tour of the country, accompanied by his ministers. The tour allowed the Sultan to listen directly to his subjects' concerns.

In 1991 Sultan Qaboos established a Consultative Council, or Majlis Al-Shura. In November the Sultan issued a royal decree expanding the electorate to include all native born citizens. This was a departure from the 2000 election format in which the Government established a system under which Consultative Council members, male and female, were elected directly by receiving the most votes from eligible voters in their districts. In the 2000 elections, the Government selected more than 175,000 men and women, approximately 25 percent of adult citizens, to register to vote, of whom 114,000 registered and 100,000 voted. The Government's selection criteria reportedly was based on tribal and social status; educational background; personal and professional connections; and loyalty to the Government. In 2000 the number of eligible female voters increased from 5,000 to 52,000. In August 2000 a royal decree abolished the prior procedure under which voters (or electors) had volunteered as candidates for Consultative Council seats, had their police records checked by the Government, and relied on government approval of their decision to run. The nominees with the most votes did not win appointment to the Consultative Council if the Sultan decided not to appoint them. Under the new procedures, candidates were not subject to government scrutiny, and the Sultan no longer ratified winning candidates. However, the Sultan controlled the process, and at least two

sitting members of the Consultative Council were excluded from the outset from standing for reelection in 2000 possibly because of their criticism of ministers during previous Consultative Council sessions.

The Consultative Council has no formal legislative powers, which remain concentrated in the Sultan's hands; however, it served as a conduit of information between the citizens and the government ministries. No serving government official was eligible to be a Consultative Council member. The Consultative Council may question government ministers in public or in private, review all draft laws on social and economic policy, and recommend legislative changes to the Sultan, who makes the final decision. In 2001 the membership of the Majlis Al-Dawla, or State Council, increased from 48 to 53 members, including 5 female members. The precise responsibilities of the State Council and its relationship to the existing Consultative Council have yet to be clarified. The State Council and the Consultative Council together form the Majlis Oman, or Council of Oman. In 2000 a royal directive was issued prohibiting members of the Council of Oman from serving more than two 3-year terms.

The Sultan publicly has advocated a greater role for women in both the public and private sectors. Women held senior government positions, including four at the undersecretary level and there was one woman ambassador. Women constituted 30 percent of eligible voters in the 2000 elections, and, according to the Sultan's November statement of intention, all women 21 years or older will be eligible to vote in the 2003 elections.

Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

The Government prohibited the establishment of human rights NGOs, and there were no government-controlled or autonomous human rights entities in the country. The existing restrictions on the freedom of speech and association did not permit any activity or speech critical of the Government.

There were no visits to the country by U.N. or international human rights organizations.

Section 5 Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Disability, Language, or Social Status

The Basic Charter prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, ethnic origin, race, language, sect, place of residence, and social class. Effective government enforcement was insufficient in some areas, and societal and cultural discrimination based on gender, race, social class, and disability existed.

Women

The law does not specifically address domestic violence against women; however, according to Shari'a, all forms of physical abuse are illegal. There was no evidence of a pattern of spousal abuse, although observers claimed that allegations of such abuse in the Shari'a courts were not uncommon and conversations with local observers indicated that domestic violence was a real concern. Doctors did not have a legal responsibility to report either spousal or child abuse to the courts. Battered women may file a complaint with the police but more often sought family intervention to protect them from violent domestic situations. Likewise, families sought to intervene to keep such problems from public view. There were reports of employers and co-workers physically and sexually abusing domestic servants and harassing hospital nurses without being held accountable for such actions (see Section 6.d.). There were no government programs for abused women.

The law prohibits rape. Shari'a provides no punishment for spousal rape.

Prostitution was illegal, and due to strict cultural norms and immigration controls, was rare.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) was still practiced by very few communities in the interior and in the Dhofar region. Experts believed that the number of such cases was small and declining annually.

Many women lived within the confines of their homes. While progress has been made in changing laws and attitudes, women continued to face many forms of discrimination. Illiteracy among older women hampered their ability to own property, participate in the modern sector of the economy, or inform themselves of their rights. Government officials frequently denied women land grants or housing loans and preferred to conduct business with a woman's husband or other male relative. Women may own property. Women required permission from a male relative to leave the country (see Section 2.b.).

Some aspects of Islamic law and tradition as interpreted in the country also discriminated against women. Shari'a favors male heirs in adjudicating inheritance claims. Many women were reluctant to take an inheritance dispute to court for fear of alienating the family.

Since 1970 conditions for women have improved markedly in several areas. Whereas in 1970 no schools existed for girls, the most recent figures available from the Ministry of Education in 1999 reported an enrollment rate of nearly 95 percent for all girls eligible for elementary school, and government statistics showed that girls make up 49 percent of all citizen students. The Government spent approximately 9 percent of its total budget on education. In the 2000-2001 school year, 48.7 percent of the total number of students attending public schools were girls, slightly lower than in previous years. Women constituted

approximately half of the 5,000 students at Sultan Qaboos University. In 2001, 731 women and 566 men received bachelor's degrees as members of the 11th graduating class, while 2 women and 40 men received master's degrees. The university had a quota system with the apparent goal of increasing the number of men studying certain specialties. For example, women reportedly were being limited to 50 percent of the seats in the medical department. The quota system was expected to allow women to constitute a majority in some other departments.

Women also have made gains in the work force. Some educated women have attained positions of authority in government, business, and the media. Approximately 30 percent of all civil servants were women; of these, 59 percent were citizens. In both the public and private sectors, women were entitled to maternity leave and equal pay for equal work. The Government, the country's largest employer of women, observed such regulations, as did many private sector employers. However, many educated women still faced job discrimination because prospective employers feared that they might resign to marry or raise families. Female employees in the Government have sought administrative redress for alleged denial of promotion in favor of less capable men. Government grants for study abroad generally were divided evenly between men and women. According to recently published statistics approximately 23 percent of students who study abroad under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Higher Education were women.

Within the Government, women's affairs were the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Development (formerly the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labor, and Vocational Training). The Ministry provided support for women's affairs through funding of the Oman Women's Association (OWA) and local community development centers (LCDCs). The OWA consisted of 25 chapters, with an active membership of more than 3,000 women. Typical OWA activities included sponsoring health or sociological lectures, kindergarten services, and handicraft-training programs. The OWA also provided an informal counseling and support role for women with divorce-related difficulties, girls forced to marry against their will, and women and girls suffering from domestic abuse. The main purpose of the 50 LCDCs located throughout the country was to encourage women to improve the quality of life for their families and to improve their contributions to the community. LCDC activities focused on health and sociology lectures, childcare issues, and agricultural and traditional handicraft training programs.

Children

The Government has made the education, health, and general welfare of children a budgetary priority. Primary school education for children, including noncitizen children, was free and universal, but not compulsory. Most children attended school through secondary school, until age 18. The infant mortality rate continued to decline, and comprehensive immunization rates rose. The Government provided free health care for children to age six. There was no pattern of familial or other child abuse, but government officials have publicly called for greater awareness and prevention of child abuse.

Child prostitution was not known to occur.

FGM was rare; it was performed mainly on young girls (see Section 5, women).

Persons with Disabilities

There were no laws prohibiting discrimination against persons with disabilities. The Government has mandated parking spaces and some ramps for wheelchair access in private and government office buildings and shopping centers. Compliance was voluntary, yet widely observed. Students in wheelchairs had easy access to Sultan Qaboos University. There was 1 government-sponsored rehabilitation center in the capital area and seventeen private rehabilitation centers throughout the country. The Government has established numerous rehabilitation centers for children with disabilities. Persons with disabilities, including blind persons, worked in government offices. While the Government could charge a small fee to citizens seeking government health care, persons with disabilities generally were not charged for physical therapy and prosthetics support.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The Basic Charter prohibits discrimination based on racial or ethnic characteristics. While in the past, citizens of African origin claimed that they frequently faced job discrimination in both the public and private sectors, these allegations have diminished in recent years.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

Workers did not have the right to form or to join unions.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law stipulates that "it is absolutely forbidden to provoke a strike for any reason." Labor unrest was rare. The law does not provide for the right to collective bargaining; however, it required that employers of more than 50 workers form a joint labor-management committee as a communication forum between the two groups. The implementation of this provision was uneven,

and the effectiveness of the committees was questionable. In general the committees discussed such matters as the living conditions at company-provided housing. They were not authorized to discuss wages, hours, or conditions of employment. Such issues were specified in the work contracts signed individually by workers and employers and had to be consistent with the guidelines of the Ministry of Manpower (formerly a part of the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labor, and Vocational Training).

The law defines conditions of employment for some citizens and foreign workers. It covers domestic servants and construction workers but not temporary workers or those with work contracts that expire within 3 months.

Work rules must be approved by the Ministry of Social Development and posted conspicuously in the workplace by employers of 10 or more workers. Similarly any employer with 50 or more workers must establish a grievance procedure. Regardless of the size of the company, any employee, including foreign workers, may file a grievance with the Labor Welfare Board. In some cases, worker representatives filed collective grievances, but most grievances were filed by individual workers. Lower-paid workers used the procedure regularly. Legal counsel may represent plaintiffs and defendants in such cases.

There were no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Bonded Labor

The Basic Charter prohibits forced or bonded labor for any person, including children; however, the Government did not investigate or enforce the law effectively. Foreign workers at times were placed in situations amounting to forced labor. Employers have withheld letters of release (documents that release workers from employment contracts), which allow workers to change employers. Without such a letter, a foreign worker must continue to work for his current employer or become technically unemployed, which was sufficient grounds for deportation. Many foreign workers were not aware of their right to take such disputes before the Labor Welfare Board. Others were reluctant to file complaints for fear of retribution from unscrupulous employers. In most cases brought before it, the Board released the worker from service without deportation and awarded compensation for time worked under compulsion; however, employers faced no penalty other than to reimburse the worker's back wages.

d. Status of Child Labor Practices and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits children under the age of 13 from working. Children between 13 and 16 years of age may be employed, but must obtain the Ministry's permission to work overtime, at night, on weekends or holidays, or to perform strenuous labor. The Ministry of Social Development generally enforced the law; however, in practice enforcement often did not extend to some small family businesses that employ underage children, particularly in the agricultural and fisheries sectors. Child labor did not exist in any industry.

The law specifically prohibits forced or bonded labor by children, and it was not known to occur.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The Ministry of Social Development issues minimum wage guidelines for various categories of workers. In 1998 the Government raised the minimum wage for most citizens to about \$260 (100 rials) per month, plus \$52 (20 rials) for transportation and housing. Minimum wage guidelines did not apply to a variety of occupational categories, including small businesses that employed fewer than five persons, the self-employed, domestic servants, dependent family members working for a family firm, and some categories of manual labor. Many foreigners worked in occupations that were exempt from the minimum wage law, and the Government was lax in enforcing minimum wage guidelines, where applicable, for foreign workers employed in menial jobs. However, highly skilled foreign workers were well paid.

The minimum wage was sufficient to provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family. The compensation for foreign manual laborers and clerks was sufficient to cover living expenses and to permit savings to be sent home.

The private sector workweek was 40 to 45 hours and included a rest period from Thursday afternoon through Friday. Government workers have a 35-hour workweek. While the law does not designate the number of days in a workweek, it requires at least one 24-hour rest period per week and mandates overtime pay for hours in excess of 48 per week. Government regulations regarding hours of employment were not always enforced. Employees who worked extra hours without compensation could file a complaint before the Labor Welfare Board, but the Board's rulings were not binding.

Every worker has the right to 15 days of annual leave during the first 3 years of employment and 30 days per year thereafter. Employers provide many foreign nationals, including domestic servants, with annual or biannual round-trip tickets to their countries of origin.

The law states that employers must not place their employees in situations involving dangerous work; however, the law does not specifically grant a worker the right to remove himself from dangerous work without jeopardy to his continued employment. All employers were required by law to provide first aid facilities. Work sites with more than 100 employees were required to have a nurse. Employees covered under the Labor Law could recover compensation for injury or illness sustained on the job

through employer-provided medical insurance. The health and safety standard codes were enforced by inspectors from the Department of Health and Safety of the Directorate of Labor. As required by law, they made regular onsite inspections.

Foreign workers constituted at least 50 percent of the work force and as much as 80 percent of the private sector work force. In the past, there were reports that employers or male coworkers sexually harassed and abused foreign females employed in such positions as domestic servants and hospital nurses. Foreign women employed as domestic servants and garment workers have claimed that their employers withheld their salaries and that government officials were unresponsive to their grievances, due to investigative procedures that disadvantaged the victim. There were reports of employers physically and sexually abusing foreign domestic servants, and employers were not always held accountable for such actions. Foreign women at times have had to ask their Governments' embassies for shelter to escape abuse (see Section 5).

Foreign workers at times found themselves in situations amounting to forced labor (see Section 6.c.).

f. Trafficking in Persons

The law does not prohibit trafficking in persons; however, there were no reports that persons were trafficked to, from, or within the country.